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THE OPERATIONS OF THE 423D INFANTRY (106TH INFANTRY
DIVISION) IN THE VICINITY OF SCHONEBERG DURING THE
BATTLE OF THE ARDENNES, 16-19 DECEMBER 1944
(ARDENNES-ALSACE CAMPAIGN)
(Personal Experience of a Battalion Operations Officer)

Type of operation described: INFANTRY REGIMENT DEFENDING,
SURROUNDED AND ATTEMPTING TO BREAK OUT

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ORIENTATION

INTRODUCTION

By October 1944 the Allied forces in Western Europe had swept across FRANCE and were generally poised along the western frontier of GERMANY. (See Map A) The rapidity of the advance across FRANCE and the resulting extended front, pressed to the limits of logistical support, had quickly reduced the impetus of advance. As the problem of supply became more acute, large scale advances became impossible and the front temporarily stabilized. (1)

Checked as they were at the fixed defenses along the German frontier, the mounting of a full scale assault became necessary and toward this end momentous efforts were directed. However, Allied commanders, determined to maintain the initiative and to continue the drive into GERMANY at the earliest opportunity, launched a series of limited attacks preliminary to operations which were to mean the final destruction of all German forces west of the RHINE RIVER. While maintaining a relentless pressure on the enemy, supply difficulties had to be solved, regrouping had to be accomplished and units had to be refitted. (2)

In mid October, it was decided by the Supreme Commander that beginning early in November the First US Army was to advance on COLOGNE from the vicinity of AACHEN while the Third US Army struck at the vital SAAR BASIN. (3) To continue a sustained offensive, meanwhile

(1) A-1, p. 66
(2) A-2, p. 323
(3) A-11, p. 269

holding a front of more than 500 miles, it was necessary to concentrate available forces, reducing to a minimum those forces holding relatively static positions. The largest of these sectors was the portion of the First US Army line stretching through the ARDENNES region from MONSCHAU to TRIER, a distance of some 75 miles held by VIII Corps. (4)

THE GENERAL SITUATION

On 6 December 1944, the First US Army issued orders for the continuation of its offensive to seize the ROER RIVER dams, the possession of which was essential before the attack could profitably continue toward COLOGNE. (See Map A) VIII Corps, on the army south flank, was "to continue on its previous mission of conducting aggressive defense within the Corps zone and be prepared to advance to COBLENZ on army order when the main attack had progressed sufficiently to lessen resistance on its Corps front". The newly arrived 106th Infantry Division was to relieve the 8d Infantry Division on the VIII Corps front thus releasing it to V Corps, to the north, to assist in the army attack. (5)

From north to south, the VIII Corps front on 12 December was held by the 106th Infantry Division, 28th Infantry Division, 9th Armored Division less Combat Command B and Combat Command R and the 4th Infantry Division. Corps reserve was composed of Combat Command R, 9th Armored Division, and four engineer combat battalions. (See Map B) (6)

The ARDENNES region through which the VIII Corps front extended was characterized by rugged, difficult terrain. High plateaus intersected by many deeply cut valleys and covered by numerous heavily wooded areas increased the difficulties of large scale tactical movements

(4) A-2, p. 338

(5) A-3, p. 88

(6) A-4, p. 6

assume responsibility for the defense of the sector. Attached to the division were the 14th Cavalry Group of two squadrons and one artillery battalion, the 820th Tank Destroyer Battalion (3*, towed) and the 634th Antiaircraft Artillery (AA) Battalion. The attachments were similar to those of the 2d Division with the exception of the tank battalion attached to the latter. (10)

The 106th Division arrived at ST. VITH on 10 December after a two day motor march of 270 miles; relief of the 2d Division began at once, one regimental combat team at a time, and was completed by 12 December. The 106th Division assumed responsibility for the sector at 111900 December. (11)

After relieving the 2d Division man for man and gun for gun in compliance with Corps orders, the division was disposed with the 14th Cavalry Group on the north (left) and three regiments abreast; 422d Infantry, 423 Infantry and 424th Infantry on the south. The 2d Battalion, 423d Infantry was in division reserve. (12)

The division sector extended from the vicinity of LOSHEIM across the LOSHEIM GAP to the ridge of the SCHNEK EIFEL, thence southward astride the Siegfried Line to the southern nose of the ridge. Here the line was echeloned some 2000 yards to the west of the Siegfried Line where it continued south following the high ground just east of the OUR RIVER to the vicinity of GROSSKAMPENBERG, a ground distance of some 27 miles. (13)

From the east two major routes enter the zone, both converging on ST. VITH, the division command post; one from north of the SCHNEK EIFEL down the OUR RIVER VALLEY, the other from south of the SCHNEK EIFEL.

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- (10) A-7, p. 2
 - (11) A-7, p. 2
 - (12) A-6, Part I
 - (13) A-6, Part I

SITUATION OF THE 423D INFANTRY REGIMENT (See Map D)

By 111600 December, the 423d Infantry less one battalion had completed the relief of the 38th Infantry, 2d Division and assumed responsibility for the defense of its sector. Troop B, 18th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron and Company B, 331st Medical Battalion were attached to the regiment. Company C less one platoon, 820th Tank Destroyer Battalion, Company B, 81st Engineer Combat Battalion and the 590th Field Artillery Battalion were in direct support. (14)

Holding the southern half of the SCHNEE EIFEL within the division lines, the 3d Battalion on the regimental left and the 1st Battalion, bent around the southern nose of the ridge, were in relatively strong positions. Although both sides of the ridge in the 1st Battalion area were under enemy observation, concealment was good, pillboxes were sufficiently numerous to allow their use as command posts down to and including platoons, and observation and fields of fire were relatively good. (15)

From the 1st Battalion right to the vicinity of BLEIALF the line was refused some 1500 yards to the rear and west leaving a diagonal gap of about 2000 yards. The defensive positions then continued southward along the high ground just west of the narrow ALF RIVER for another 3500 yards. Antitank Company with one platoon of Cannon Company and one rifle platoon from the 3d Battalion held the line from BLEIALF inclusive to the railway tunnel exclusive, all elements defending as riflemen. Troop B, 18th Cavalry Squadron, extended the front to the regimental right boundary. These troops were organized into a provisional battalion under command of the antitank company commander. Company C, 820th Tank Destroyer Battalion was in the area of the provisional battalion. (16) Elements

(14) A-6, Part I

(15) Personal Knowledge

(16) A-6, Part I

of Service Company and Regimental Headquarters Company were in regimental reserve. (17) To garrison the six mile front of the regimental sector, depth in defensive positions had been sacrificed.

On the left contact was maintained with the 422d Infantry by patrols and on the right with the 106th Reconnaissance Troop, attached to the 424th Infantry and occupying GROSSLANGENFELD, by patrols.

Wire lines existed to all units down to companies and lateral lines had been laid between regiments. While two channels existed between the division and regimental command posts, both were in a single cable; now were alternate wire lines laid between other units. Teletypewriter communication was likewise available to division. Radio silence was maintained among all units. Radios had been issued to all elements in England but since radio silence had been imposed continuously no opportunity for proper calibration or testing had been available except such as could be done without actual radio operation. (18)

Class I and III supplies were normal and adequate while only a major shortage of winter combat clothing, previously mentioned, was present among Class II and IV items. The available rate of supply of ammunition per weapon per day was: 81mm, 8 rounds; 105mm (for the howitzers of Cannon Company), 5 rounds; 105mm (for artillery howitzers), 42 rounds; 3 inch, 15 rounds. With the exception of artillery ammunition, only half of this daily available supply was authorized for use; the other half remained under regimental control loaded on unit vehicles kept near the regimental ammunition supply point. Other types of ammunition were unrestricted in use. The rapid move of the regiment across FRANCE and into the lines had resulted in units entering the lines with less than basic loads of or no mortar or artillery ammunition. The 2d Division had

(17) A-9, p. 2

(18) Personal Knowledge

generously turned part of their surplus stocks over to the 106th Division on position when relieved; and every effort was made at once to fill all basic loads of ammunition. Surplus stocks were not authorized. (19) A request for antitank mines made on 14 December brought the curt reply from the army ammunition supply point that 48 hours advance notice was required. (20)

During the period 11-15 December the weather was cold and damp with temperatures generally ranging between 30° and 40°. Snow, sleet or rain fell intermittently maintaining from 6 to 12 inches of snow over the area and making roads to the rear all but impassable. Added to these difficulties were almost daily heavy fogs which remained in the valleys until late in the morning. (21)

On the day it had entered the lines the regiment was at nearly full strength. Its training over a year and a half period had been rigorous and thorough. However in the six months prior to debarkation for overseas, the regiment had lost more than fifty percent of its riflemen as overseas replacements; its last shipment was made after the regiment itself had been alerted for overseas shipment. Their vacancies had been filled with men from miscellaneous units, good soldiers but not trained riflemen. In spite of the extreme discomfort of the cold, damp weather and inadequate winter clothing and the obviously extended and exposed position, morale was high. This was a quiet sector where men could learn rapidly but safely. (22)

OPERATIONS OF THE 423D INFANTRY, 11-15 DECEMBER

The relief of the 38th Infantry on 11 December, although made during daylight, was covered by a fog and was completed without mishap or confusion. Every advantage was immediately taken of the opportunities

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- (19) A-6, Part II
 - (20) Personal Knowledge
 - (21) Personal Knowledge
 - (22) Personal Knowledge

presented to gain maximum experience. Patrolling was active, albeit initially overly cautious, with maximum numbers of officers and men participating. Small unit leaders and staffs rapidly settled into their jobs and routine operations ran smoothly. Detailed counterattack plans were prepared, minor fire fights occurred, and harassing fires were frequently laid down on the enemy lines. In short, the routine activities of a unit in defense in contact with an enemy on the defensive continued.

(23)

Commanders of all echelons were dissatisfied with the defensive positions which they had been ordered to occupy, a defense based in part on tank support, extra communications equipment and additional crew-served weapons, none of which the 106th Division had. (24) Every effort was made to obtain authority to make desired adjustments without success, although on 14 December division directed "that a list of additional weapons by type necessary on the present position be submitted." (25)

During this period, enemy patrols were active; each night one or more infiltrated through the regimental line. Propaganda leaflets were found tacked to trees in the rear areas. Prisoners, however, indicated no new enemy units and higher headquarters seemed generally to view activities as those normal in any quiet sector. Wheeled and tracked vehicle movements were reported by patrols on the nights of 14 and 15 December; the comment received from Corps concerning these reports was that the sounds heard were undoubtedly from enemy loudspeaker systems.

(26)

THE GERMAN COUNTEROFFENSIVE PLAN

Even as the Allies were striving to overcome the tremendous logistical problems facing them during October and November, the German Army,

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- (23) A-9, p. 2, Personal Knowledge
(24) Personal Knowledge
(25) A-6, 14 December
(26) Personal Knowledge

taking advantage of the temporary slow-down of the Allied advance, made herculean efforts to build and train new units and to equip and supply them for a gigantic offensive planned to cut off the British forces on the north from their bases and ultimately to destroy them or force a withdrawal from the continent. To accomplish this, the major port of ANTWERP was selected as the main objective. (See Map E) (27)

The general plan was to break through the weak American forces in the ARDENNES with the Sixth SS Panzer Army making the main effort and striking toward the MEUSE RIVER between LIEGE and HUY, then driving on to ANTWERP. The Fifth Panzer Army on the left was to wheel northward to cross the MEUSE in the vicinity of NAMUR and push on to BRUSSELS, protecting the left flank of the main effort. To the north, the Fifteenth Army was to attack toward LIEGE protecting and assisting the main effort made by the Sixth SS Panzer Army. To the south, the Seventh Army of one Corps was to make a diversionary attack into LUXEMBOURG. (28) For this offensive, 24 divisions with supporting elements, including those on the VIII Corps' front, were to be used. Training, re-equipping, and concentration in assembly areas were accomplished with the utmost secrecy; and favored by overcast and foggy weather which made aerial reconnaissance impossible, complete tactical surprise was obtained. (29)

NARRATION

THE GERMANS STRIKE

Heavy artillery fire, interspersed with mortar and Nebelwerfer fire began to fall along the division front beginning at 160530 December. The last great German counteroffensive had begun. (30)

The 423d Infantry staff immediately alerted all units. By 0600,

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- (27) A-5, p. 275
(28) A-5, p. 275
(29) A-2, p. 346
(30) A-6, Part II

wire communication with Antitank Company, Troop B, 18th Cavalry Squadron and the 590th Field Artillery was out. Radio nets were opened. (31) Particularly heavy fire in the area of Service Company and the regimental ammunition supply point in HALENFELD destroyed a large number of vehicles and much of the regiment's extra ammunition. (32) (See Map F)

As the German preparatory fires began to lift shortly after 0600, German infantry struck BLEIALF in force driving Antitank Company back through the village house by house. Assisted by the reflected light of searchlights playing against the low-hanging clouds, the enemy had moved rapidly through the half light. The stubborn resistance of the somewhat disorganized elements of Antitank Company, supported by preplanned artillery barrages and the fire of Cannon Company, broke up repeated enemy infantry attacks toward and within the town. (33)

Simultaneously, another enemy group had moved up the railroad on the regimental right and quickly pushed between Antitank Company and Troop B cutting off and destroying the right platoon of Antitank Company and breaking contact between the two units. (34)

By 0800 the enemy held most of BLEIALF; wire lines were still out between the regimental command post and the right flank; and pressure against Antitank Company seemed unrelenting. Service Company and Cannon Company were alerted and by 0930 had moved into BLEIALF. Here this force of about 100 men, all that were available, were committed as part of the provisional battalion. (35)

Meanwhile authority from division had been requested by and granted to the regimental commander to use Company B, 81st Engineer Combat

(31) A-6, 16 December

(32) Statement by Major Carl H. Cosby, then Executive Officer, 1st Battalion, 27 January 1950

(33) A-9, p. 2, Personal Knowledge

(34) A-6, Part II

(35) A-6, Part II, Personal Knowledge

Battalion as a rifle company. The company was immediately ordered to entruck and move from SCHONBERG to BLEIALF. Only 70 men were available. Upon arrival, the company launched an independent attack against the west shoulder of the penetration with limited success before it was stopped. (36)

With this additional force at his disposal, the provisional battalion commander was directed to clear BLEIALF and to regain contact on the right flank. By noon with the forces on hand plus officers and men from Regimental Headquarters Company whom the regimental commander had subsequently moved to BLEIALF, a counterattack was launched with the fire support of Company C, 820th TD Battalion and the 590th FA Battalion which developed into a bitter house-to-house struggle. The enemy was gradually cleared from the village and by 1500 was driven out. Over seventy prisoners were taken, identifying the enemy assault unit as the 293d Regiment, 18th Volksgrenadier Division. (37)

The regimental commander had placed his executive officer in command of the provisional battalion about 1300; it was he who reorganized the original defenses with the remaining elements of Antitank and Cannon Companies holding BLEIALF and Company B, 81st Engineers extending the line toward the railroad on the right. Service Company was held in mobile reserve north of BLEIALF. The enemy dug in 300-500 yards to the front. (38)

Attempts to regain physical contact with Troop B on the right flank and through it with 424th Infantry were unsuccessful. Attacked during the first German rush, Troop B had remained under constant pressure. By

(36) A-6, Part I

(37) A-6, Part II

(38) A-6, Part II

noon, finding his unit running dangerously low on ammunition and attacked from the vicinity of GROSSLANGENFELD where the 106th Reconnaissance Troop had been, the troop commander finally was able to contact the regimental command post by radio and requested authority to withdraw. Knowing the situation on the right, the regimental commander granted this request. Troop B withdrew to WINTERSCHIED and organized a perimeter defense. (39)

Throughout the day the 1st and 3d Battalions had been subjected to sporadic artillery and mortar fire; minor enemy attacks, apparently patrols in force, had hit the 1st Battalion repeatedly. During the afternoon two tanks separately nosed toward the 1st Battalion from the vicinity of BRANDSCHIED, but withdrew when fired upon at close range. (40)

The 590th Field Artillery had rendered unfailing support, particularly in the BLEIALF area, despite heavy German counterbattery fire and resulting losses including one battery commander and several howitzers. (41)

Still under division control, the 2d Battalion had been moved during the afternoon to the vicinity of SCHONBERG, there to block the roads running to the northeast and south and to hold this vital road center. (42) By 1730 defenses had been organized. Three hours later orders from division were received by the 2d Battalion to move to the northeast to relieve the left flank of the 422d Infantry and to protect the displacement of the 589th Field Artillery Battalion. Moving by motor under blackout conditions through sleet and mud via the circuitous route from

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- (39) A-6, Part II
(40) Personal Knowledge
(41) A-8, p. 51
(42) A-6, 15 December

SCHONBERG south to RADSCHIED and then north, the 2d Battalion reached the area of the 589th Field Artillery Battalion about 170100. (43)

At the end of the first day the 423d Infantry had maintained its original positions despite heavy enemy attacks and numerous communications failures. Wire lines had been interrupted by enemy artillery concentrations and radios had been unsatisfactory at best. Lack of previous calibration and adjustment, unfavorable terrain and weather and enemy jamming, had made radio contact fleeting or non-existent at all echelons. (44)

Some eighteen hours after the German Army had launched its attack it had failed to reach its objective for that day--ST. VITH. (45) Division was informed by the regimental commander, "(I) will hold present position until ordered differently." (46)

THE BREAKTHROUGH (See Map G)

Artillery fire began to fall on BLEIALF again beginning at 170300; the provisional battalion reported armor followed by infantry approaching its positions. Communication with the 590th Field Artillery was again disrupted as was communication with the 422d Infantry to the north. (47)

Before dawn the enemy struck in force all along the front of the provisional battalion overrunning defensive areas and penetrating between Antitank Company and Company B, 81st Engineers. By 0630 enemy forces had taken BLEIALF and a large force rapidly moved north toward SCHONBERG. Within two hours it had joined another enemy infantry-tank column which had driven south to SCHONBERG after a breakthrough in the 14th Cavalry Group sector to the north. The 423d and 422d Infantries were surrounded. (48)

(43) Statement by Captain Oliver B. Patton, then Platoon Leader, Company F, 24 January 1950

(44) A-6, Part I, Personal Knowledge

(45) A-3, p. 117

(46) A-6, 16 December

(47) A-6, 17 December

(48) A-6, Part I

Forced back in disorder but fighting every step of the way with the fire support of one platoon of Cannon Company, the provisional battalion withdrew to the high ground just west of BUCHET. Regimental headquarters and defense platoon personnel joined the fight against scattered enemy groups as the regimental command post fought to disengage itself and displace. This was accomplished and the command post and regimental collecting station moved to the vicinity of the 3d Battalion command post. (49)

Troop B, 18th Cavalry Squadron and Company B, 81st Engineer Battalion were now definitely isolated, having physical contact neither with each other nor to either flank. Troop B, again in radio contact with regiment, was ordered to fall back to MUTZENICH and to later join the regiment if forced to withdraw again. (50) There, with remnants of the 106th Reconnaissance Troop from the 424th Infantry's left flank, Troop B remained until it was realized that the regiment could not be joined. Late in the afternoon the regimental commander authorized Troop B to withdraw toward ST. VITH if unable to reach the regiment. Withdrawing via SCHONBERG, the leading platoon broke into a column of American 2½ ton trucks moving toward ST. VITH only to find that they were loaded with armed Germans. Racing down the left side of the road toward the head of the column, firing at point blank range, this platoon was finally destroyed by enemy tanks. Regiment last heard from Troop B as the remaining elements prepared to infiltrate through to ST. VITH. (51) Contact was not to be regained with Company B, 81st Engineers. One platoon had been overrun and lost in the first German attack but the company continued to hold its position. Another enemy assault in late afternoon overran a second platoon and

(49) Personal Knowledge

(50) A-6, 17 December

(51) A-8, p. 93

remaining elements withdrew only to be captured some two days later west of SCHONBERG. (52)

With the regimental right flank driven back toward BUCHET and a known gap of some 8000 yards open to the south, the regimental commander began organizing a perimeter defense. Company C was moved to extend the 1st Battalion right to the high ground just west of BUCHET. The provisional battalion was disbanded and the remnants pulled from the line. The gap left between 1st and 3d Battalions by Company C's move was filled by the Ammunition and Pioneer Platoon, cooks helpers, truck drivers and battalion headquarters personnel of the 1st Battalion organized into a provisional company. (53)

Meanwhile the 2d Battalion in the 422d Infantry rear area to the north had been heavily engaged since dawn protecting the displacement of the 589th Field Artillery Battalion from the German drive toward SCHONBERG from the north. By 0700 its radio in the division command net had been hit. The battalion had destroyed seven enemy tanks but continuing enemy tank-infantry attacks were forcing the battalion back. Supported by the 590th Field Artillery Battalion the 2d Battalion began a daylight withdrawal. (54)

During the morning the 590th Field Artillery Battalion had received orders from the Division Artillery Commander to displace to the vicinity of SCHONBERG. Upon learning that SCHONBERG was filled with German armor, the battalion commander, contacting the 2d Battalion commander whose withdrawal he was supporting, decided to fall back into the SCHNEE Eifel positions of the 423d Infantry with the 2d Battalion. (55)

(52) A-9, p. 2

(53) Personal Knowledge

(54) A-8, p. 84

(55) A-8, p. 89

By 1100 the 2d Battalion and the 590th Field Artillery Battalion, with three howitzers entered the area of the 423d Infantry. (56) The regimental commander placed the 2d Battalion in position at once extending the perimeter defense some 1500 yards further toward the northeast from the vicinity of BUCHET. The 590th moved into positions within the perimeter generally west of the 3d Battalion command post. Cannoneers who could be spared were put into the perimeter defense as rifleman. Informing the division of the arrival of these units, the regimental commander also stated, "Will hold perimeter. Drop ammunition, food and medical supplies until route open." (57)

Shortly before 1500 a message from division was received, five hours after it had been sent: "Expect to clear out area west of you this afternoon with reinforcements. Withdraw from present position if they become untenable. Save all transportation possible." All in the command post felt that Combat Command R, 9th Armored Division was surely on the way. (58)

Enemy pressure slackened during the late afternoon and by nightfall the situation of the regiment was not too bad. True, the regiment was cut off, but a perimeter defense had been organized and the regiment had its three battalions again. Artillery support was available although the 590th had only slightly more than 100 rounds. Patrols were still in contact with the 422d Infantry to the north, still in position although its north flank was bent back to the east. Casualties within the regiment numbered about 250, 150 of which had been in the units that had made up the provisional battalion. Troop B, 18th Cavalry Squadron, Company B, 81st Engineer Battalion and the guns of Company C, 820th Tank Destroyer

(56) Statement by Major Cosby, then 1st Battalion Executive Officer, 27 January 1950

(57) A-6, 17 December

(58) A-6, Part I, Personal Knowledge

Battalion had been lost. Mortar ammunition was running low, but small arms ammunition was on hand. About two thirds of a K ration remained.

(59) Word had been received that the requested air drop would be accomplished within the perimeter the next morning and Combat Command R, 9th Armored Division was thought to be nearing the position. The 423d Infantry would hold.

THE THIRD DAY

About 172330 the regimental commander had held a meeting with his battalion commanders during which the situation and conduct of the defense had been discussed including plans for the probable arrival of the 9th Armored Division. Plans were also made to receive the supplies to be dropped next morning. During this meeting a radio message initially sent some seven hours earlier was received ordering the 423d and 422d Infantries to withdraw to the line of the OUR RIVER evacuating all vehicles and equipment possible. Relaying the message to the 422 Infantry, not then in radio communication with division, the two regimental commanders agreed that this message was now obsolete and that they would remain in position since subsequent to its origination both had reported their situations and instructions had been received concerning the air drop to be made within the perimeter defense. However, some initial planning in event of a possible future withdrawal, probably via SCHONBERG, was completed although such a withdrawal was now considered unlikely in view of the reinforcements and resupply expected shortly. (60)

Orders were received by radio about 180730, dated 180215 from division, which stated: "Panzer Regimental Combat Team on SCHONBERG-ST. VITH road---Mission to destroy by fire from dug in positions south of SCHONBERG-ST. VITH road. Ammunition, food and water will be dropped. When mission accomplished move to area ST. VITH." (61) The two

(59) Statement of Major Cosby, 27 January 1950

(60) A-9, p. 3, Personal Knowledge

(61) A-6, 18 December

regimental commanders agreed to move out together toward SCHONBERG with regiments abreast, the 423d on the left moving along the axis HALENFELD--OBERLASCHEID--SCHONBERG. (See Map H) After a map reconnaissance the regimental commander formulated his plan and at about 0800 issued the regimental order to his battalion commanders and staff. The regiment was to move out at 1000 in column of battalions: 2d, 3d, regimental separate companies, 1st via HALENFELD--OBERLASCHEID--RADSCHIED--ENGINEER CUTOFF--SCHONBERG. The 2d Battalion was to be the advance guard; the 1st Battalion was to furnish the rear guard. Both the 1st and 3d Battalions were to leave covering forces in their battalion sectors. The 590th Field Artillery Battalion was to move by bounds within the column. All kitchens, baggage and supplies which could not be carried were to be destroyed and abandoned; and those command and communication vehicles and weapons carriers on position were to accompany the column. Non-transportable casualties were to be left at the regimental collecting station with some medical personnel. (62)

The 2d Battalion crossed the initial point at 181000. Elements of the 422d Infantry could be seen to the north about 1200 moving west as planned. As the 2d Battalion moved on through RADSCHIED and approached the BLEIALF-RADSCHIED road, known as Skyline Drive, about 1200, it encountered heavy rifle, mortar and artillery fire from the left front. Its leading company was aggressively engaged and attempted to push the enemy toward the south to clear the route of march. Heavy mortar fire pinned this company down and the next company was committed on its right. Supported by the battalion heavy weapons company and the fire from one howitzer of the 590th still in position, the battalion pushed the enemy some 800 yards to the southwest where it was stopped. (63) The almost

(62) Personal Knowledge

(63) Statement by Captain Oliver B. Patton, then Platoon Leader, Company F, 24 January 1950; Personal Knowledge

impossible radio contact and the need to conserve artillery ammunition rendered further artillery support impossible. (64)

As the 2d Battalion was approaching Skyline Drive a radio message from division cancelled previous instructions and ordered the 423d and 422d Infantries to seize SCHONBERG, then to move west to ST. VITH. With this in mind, as the 2d Battalion pushed the enemy south the regimental commander ordered the 3d Battalion, then in OBERLASCHIED, to move to the right of the 2d Battalion and to cut the BLEIALF-SCHONBERG road. (65) Taking the right fork west out of OBERLASCHIED the 3d Battalion moved out, quickly crossed Skyline Drive and pushed across IHREN CREEK into BELGIUM. As the battalion crossed RIDGE 536 its leading company was halted by heavy small arms and 40mm antiaircraft artillery fire from the vicinity of SCHONBERG. The battalion commander quickly moved a second company on line and with the supporting fires of its heavy weapons company the battalion attacked, still under heavy direct fire from antiaircraft guns, and gradually moved forward until the left flank company was astride the BLEIALF-SCHONBERG road. Here the battalion dug in 800 yards from the outskirts of SCHONBERG. Since noon the battalion had been out of radio contact with regiment and messengers sent to the rear failed to reach the regimental command post. Late in the afternoon, patrols sent to the right to gain contact with the 422d Infantry were unsuccessful. (66)

As the 3d Battalion cleared OBERLASCHIED about 1300 the regimental command post was established there. The 1st Battalion, with the head of its column in HALENFELD and halted by the action of the 2d Battalion near RADSCHIED, moved off the road. As the covering forces left at the original positions drifted in, a hasty defense was organized by the rear guard to protect the regimental rear. Learning that the enemy facing the 2d Battalion was being rapidly reinforced by enemy troops from the

(64) Personal Knowledge

(65) A-9, p. 3

(66) A-6, 17 December; Personal Knowledge

vicinity of BLEIALF, the regimental commander at about 1600 ordered the 1st Battalion to attack toward the southwest on the 2d Battalion's left to assist that battalion and to cut off the flow of reinforcements from BLEIALF. Moving rapidly, the 1st Battalion, less one company as rear guard, deployed along HILL 546 just south of OBERLASCHIED. Supported by its heavy weapons company, the battalion launched its attack at dusk, about 1700, in what amounted to a night attack over unfamiliar territory, down into DUREN CREEK DRAW and up the lower slopes of the ridge extending south from RADSCHIED against a now heavily reinforced enemy. Against direct fire from German 88s, one of which was taken, and heavy automatic weapons and mortar fire the battalion drove some 1200 yards. Disorganized, nearly out of ammunition, and with about 70 casualties, the battalion pulled back to HILL 546 by 2200. (67)

Shortly after darkness the regimental command post was moved just north of HILL 575 to a house which had originally been the command post of the 590th Field Artillery Battalion. The regimental executive officer remained in direct command of the 1st and 2d Battalions then still engaged. The regimental commander sent patrols out to locate the 3d Battalion and to contact the 422d Infantry, and a motor patrol north along Skyline Drive to contact any enemy in that direction. The 3d Battalion was contacted and wire communication established; no contact could be made with the 422d Infantry; and the motor patrol sent to the north was badly shot up in the darkness by an enemy roadblock some 3000 yards from the command post on Skyline Drive. (68) Contact was again made with division shortly after 2100, the first since about 1600, through considerable interference and the regiment was informed that "supplies for you and 422d to be dropped at bend of road one half mile south of SCHONBERG on 19 December. You will advise 422d." (69) About 182230 division was informed

(67) Personal Knowledge

(68) Personal Knowledge

(69) A-6, 18 December

of the regimental situation and instructions were received that "it was imperative that SCHONBERG be taken." (70) This was the last radio contact between the division command post and the 423d Infantry.

Based on this information, the Regimental Commander decided that the 1st and 2d Battalions must be disengaged at once and concentrated in the vicinity of the 3d Battalion in preparation for a daylight attack on SCHONBERG the next morning. (71)

The 590th Field Artillery Battalion, which had displaced to OBERLASCHIED about 1600 was moved to positions just north of HILL 575 to support the next morning's attack. The remaining platoon of Cannon Company, which had been with the artillery, moved into position further down in the IHREN VALLEY. The regimental command post with the remnants of the other regimental separate companies displaced to the southeast slope of RIDGE 536. The 2d Battalion, relieved of some enemy pressure by the attack of the 1st Battalion, was withdrawn and moved across IHREN CREEK to an assembly area northeast of the 3d Battalion and on the reverse slope of RIDGE 536. Leaving one company as a covering force to the south and east, the 1st Battalion withdrew along the north fork from OBERLASCHIED, picking up near HILL 575 the company which had been the rear guard, and crossed the IHREN VALLEY to an assembly area between the 2d and 3d Battalions and further down the slope of RIDGE 536. At 0300 its heavy weapons company was directed to occupy positions in the area of the 590th Field Artillery Battalion to protect that unit and the regimental rear. Seriously wounded had been left with medical personnel in the vicinity of OBERLASCHIED. (72)

During the day the 2d Battalion had lost some 300 casualties, including 16 officers. Five of eight heavy machine guns and four of six

(70) A-9, p. 3

(71) A-9, p. 3

(72) Personal Knowledge

light machine guns had been destroyed, all 81mm mortar ammunition had been expended and only 2 rounds per 60mm mortar remained. The 1st Battalion had lost about 70 men including 3 officers. Mortar ammunition was negligible. The 3d Battalion had only moderate casualties but was also woefully short of mortar ammunition. In all units small arms ammunition was low, rocket launcher ammunition was nearly gone, and machine guns averaged about 400 rounds per weapon. (73)

THE LAST DAY

Before dawn 19 December, concentration of the regiment along RIDGE 536 was complete, as complete as is possible at night over strange terrain following a disengagement with the enemy. (See Map I) Such extra ammunition as remained, about 8 rounds per rifleman, was distributed as battalions moved into their assembly areas. Although an effort was made to have men dig in for the remaining hours of darkness and until the attack order they knew was coming could be issued, little was accomplished. The men were wet, cold, hungry and exhausted. Except as previously mentioned, security consisted of listening posts only to the northeast, northwest, and southwest. There were no patrols sent to SCHONBERG or to the flanks to maintain contact with the enemy and such security measures as were taken were not coordinated by the regimental staff. The I and R platoon was maintaining a roadblock just south of RADSCHIED and was therefore of no other use to the regiment. Contact had not been gained with the 423d Infantry on the right. (74)

As dawn broke, the regimental commander made a rapid reconnaissance and completed his plan of attack. At 0830 the battalion commanders were assembled at the regimental command post and orders were issued for the attack on SCHONBERG. (75) For this attack the 423d Infantry could

(73) A-8, p. 125; Personal Knowledge

(74) Personal Knowledge

(75) A-9, p. 3

muster about half its rifle strength. The 2d Battalion on the right was at about half strength in officers and men. The 1st Battalion in the center had two rifle companies, each at about two thirds strength. The company left near OBERLASCHIED to cover the regimental rear had not been heard from. The 3d Battalion was the strongest having suffered only moderate casualties to date. The regimental separate companies were hardly to be considered after their losses of the first two days in BLEIALF. Mortar ammunition was nearly non-existent, small arms and machine gun ammunition was limited, rocket launchers had little or no ammunition, and slightly less than 100 rounds of artillery ammunition were available. Medical supplies were critical and evacuation impossible. There had been no aerial resupply.

The regimental plan of attack envisaged battalions echeloned to the right rear, the 3d Battalion on the left making the main effort with its left generally following the BLEIALF-SCHONBERG road. The trail running northeast along the crest of RIDGE 536 was to be the line of departure for the 1st and 2d Battalions. Time of attack: 191000. The 590th Field Artillery Battalion with one platoon of Cannon Company was to support the attack by fire. All remaining vehicles were to be destroyed.

As the regimental commander completed issuing his order about 0900, heavy artillery fire began to fall within the area from the vicinity of Skyline Drive. Much of the initial concentration landed near the regimental command post; and in his attempt to return to the 1st Battalion, the battalion commander was mortally wounded. For some thirty minutes heavy fire of various calibers continued to blast the southeast slope of RIDGE 536, greatly interfering with reconnaissance and preparations for the attack within the assembly area. As the fire lifted German infantry was seen sweeping over the positions of the 590th Field Artillery. The

attack would have to be made without artillery support. Company D had been decimated, six of its eight officers killed or wounded, the company commander killed. Company M commander was killed. Casualties continued to occur in all units; vehicles in IHREN VALLEY were destroyed. (76)

With the enemy rapidly closing in to the rear, the regiment could only drive forward. All remaining vehicles were ordered destroyed. The regimental commander pushed the attack and in spite of the interference from enemy artillery fire, the 3d Battalion jumped off in good order at 1000. The battalion left quickly ran into heavy direct fire from enemy antiaircraft artillery and was stopped. An American tank came up the road from SCHONBERG, fired on the attacking platoons and then withdrew. At this time the left company, along the BLEIALF-SCHONBERG road, became further engaged with an estimated German rifle company moving from the south towards SCHONBERG. Counterattacking to the south with part of the assault platoons the company commander drove the enemy back but became separated from the battalion, was attacked again and by 1330 had been captured. The battalion continued to push forward. Both remaining rifle companies reached the southern outskirts of SCHONBERG where they were stopped by intense direct antiaircraft artillery fire. By 1500 the Battalion Commander began pulling the remnants back up the slope of HILL 504. (77)

The 1st Battalion added little to the attack from the beginning. Because the battalion commander had taken none of his staff with him to receive the regimental order, valuable time was lost while the executive officer learned of the battalion commander's wound, assumed command, and was rapidly given the essentials of the attack order. Properly sending his staff forward for such reconnaissance and coordination as was

(76) Personal Knowledge

(77) Personal Knowledge

possible, the new battalion commander was able to lead the battalion across the line of departure only five minutes late. Already less one rifle company lost at OBERLASCHIED and the heavy weapons company lost along Skyline Drive that morning, another rifle company was pulled out of the battalion as it moved toward the line of departure to become the regimental rear guard. The 1st Battalion, in reality now Company B and part of Battalion Headquarters Company, pushed through the heavy woods along the eastern slope of HILL 504 under constant mortar and artillery fire, finally reaching the road running north from SCHONBERG. Here Company B remained under constant fire, until enemy tanks overran their position. By 1400 the 1st Battalion had been eliminated.

The 2d Battalion, on the regimental right, crossed the line of departure as ordered; but as its advance progressed it became separated from the 1st Battalion by a deep, rugged, wooded draw. Unable to contact the regimental commander, the battalion commander decided to attack SCHONBERG from the northeast. As the leading elements moved down into LINNE CREEK DRAW they came under heavy small arms fire from the right. Contact had finally been made with elements of the 422d Infantry. While this error was quickly corrected by aggressive action on the part of small unit leaders, both units were temporarily disorganized. Coordinating with the elements of the 422d present, one battalion plus miscellaneous elements under command of the regimental commander, patrols were sent out to the north and northeast. By mid afternoon it was known that 1500 yards to the northeast 30 enemy tanks were forming, apparently preparatory to attacking; that in the OUR VALLEY there was a strong enemy armored force to the front; and that enemy artillery could be seen going into position west of the OUR RIVER. (78)

(78) Personal Knowledge

In the meantime the 423d Infantry command post, now on HILL 504 with the 3d Battalion, had also made contact with the 422d Infantry by patrol. With one battalion eliminated and one out of his control, with heavy enemy armored forces and artillery forming, his remaining elements raked by artillery, mortar and automatic weapons, and with casualties increasing and unaided, no food and only 5-10 rounds of M-1 ammunition per rifleman remaining, the regimental commander decided that "it was apparent that further resistance was a useless sacrifice of life." Small groups were selected and sent out in several directions to attempt infiltration through to ST. VITH; few escaped. (79) At this time, with enemy armor moving toward his northern flank the regimental commander of the 422d Infantry had independently reached a similar decision.

At 191630 December the remaining elements of the 423d Infantry were surrendered. (80)

Within the short period of four days the 423d Infantry had been engaged with the enemy in a defense, a counterattack, a withdrawal, a meeting engagement and an attack. While it is not known how many Germans were killed or wounded during this period, large numbers vitally needed in the battle for the critical ST. VITH road center were deflected from this main German objective and delayed as they contained the surrounded regiments at a time when the Germans could ill afford to delay.

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

1. THE BATTLE POSITION

The defensive positions occupied by the 423d Infantry had been previously organized by another unit and were taken over without change. Few of the companies had support platoons; neither of the front line

(79) A-9, p. 3

(80) Personal Knowledge

battalions had a reserve company and the regimental reserve was meager and composed of troops not primarily riflemen. With such seriously reduced reserves and a rather wide frontage for a regiment less one battalion, the defense was cordon and, of course, completely lacked depth. In reality, the positions of the 1st and 3d Battalions were not excessively extended with frontages of about 2000 yards each. Well constructed pillboxes, concealment and well dug in positions added to the natural defensive strength of their areas. The heavy woods covering the SCHNEE EIFEL, however, had required maximum use of units in front line positions. South and west of the 1st Battalion was a 2000 yard gap to BLEIALF. For another 3500 yards, the line was held by units neither trained nor equipped to hold a position against a determined attack. Yet it was this area through which the best road net entered the regimental sector. During the winter months, with accompanying adverse weather, the road net assumed increasing importance; but these approaches were the most lightly held. The Germans apparently were familiar with the organization of the defense for they properly selected the weakest sector for their initial penetration.

The combination of the weakest unit holding the least desirable defensive position, which controlled an important avenue of approach, could have resulted only in success for the enemy's attack. The lack of reserves to eliminate such a probable penetration could have resulted only in a complete enemy breakthrough.

2. COMMUNICATIONS

Throughout the period, communications were erratic or non-existent. Wire lines, taken over intact during the relief, were in single cables and alternate lines had not been installed. Heavy enemy artillery fire and later enemy tank movement in the rear areas resulted in frequently

cut lines. Weather conditions, adverse terrain and enemy jamming made radio contact infrequent and unreliable. Radio operators not fully experienced in combat communications problems were often unable to break through interference that might otherwise have been overcome. The radio silence imposed from the time radios had been issued until an emergency required their use allowed no previous testing and resulted in perhaps one third of the radios being unable to enter assigned nets. As a consequence, artillery fire as well as that of other supporting weapons was often delayed at a critical time. Command control was also interrupted. Troop B, 18th Cavalry Squadron and Company B, 81st Engineers could have been employed more effectively on 16-17 December if radio contact had been continuous. Contact with the 3d Battalion on the afternoon of 18 December might well have speeded concentration of the regiment. Contact with the 422d Infantry during 18-19 December would have made possible a coordinated effort against SCHONBERG. Contact with Company A on 19 December would have warned the regiment of the pending German attack that overran the 590th Field Artillery. Careful staff supervision of communications during periods of planning and during later periods of execution would have overcome most of these serious omissions by assuring that alternate methods of communication were available and that primary means were operative.

3. SUPPLY AND EVACUATION

The supply shortages effecting the regiment before the German offensive, were relatively minor at that time. Because of its recent arrival in the lines, trench foot was not a problem within the regiment in spite of the shortage of winter combat clothing. The available supply rate for ammunition established by First Army was sufficient for a quiet sector, especially as ammunition was badly needed by troops attacking

elsewhere. It would be provident to authorize troops in defense in an exposed position with only weak reserves to have on position ammunition over and above basic loads. It is to be expected that the enemy will cut supply routes if possible. Expenditure might still be controlled except in emergencies. The basic loads certainly should have been available to the gun positions; the shelling of the Service Company area caused serious losses of badly needed ammunition. Rations were last drawn on 14 December. Two rations of the K or D type were required to be on hand. Little could have been done by the regimental commander or his staff to remedy this subsequent shortage. Similarly the extremely critical shortage of medical supplies by 19 December could not be corrected. Evacuation of wounded simply was not possible. Those who could not walk could only be left with medical personnel as each aid station was displaced. If the planned air resupply drops had been accomplished on either 18 or 19 December the ultimate outcome would certainly have been delayed. Reasonably continuous resupply would have maintained the fighting strength of the regiment at a higher level. In spite of the difficult weather and later discovered heavy enemy antiaircraft defenses near SCHONBERG, it seems that a calculated risk might well be taken to resupply a surrounded force of two infantry regiments and one field artillery battalion.

4. COORDINATION

Insufficient attention was paid to the coordination of plans and actions among commanders generally. The initial attack of Company B, 81st Engineers against the west shoulder of the enemy penetration in BLEIALF was made without coordination with the provisional battalion commander and was only partially successful. In contrast, however, coordination between the 590th Field Artillery and all elements of the

regiment was superior in spite of communications difficulties and resulted in each case in the infantry being greatly assisted. Most important and most neglected was the staff coordination necessary for the simultaneous assault of the two regiments on SCHONBERG. As a result contact between the two regiments was lost during the critical period of the advance on SCHONBERG; and the final attack became a series of piecemeal attacks by small units rather than a coordinated attack of two regiments. The two regimental staffs should have made every effort, to include continuous personal liaison and to maintain the closest possible coordination.

5. SECURITY

Prior to the German attack and during the following days security was well handled at all echelons. The actions of advance and rear guards were aggressive and rapid. The operations of the covering forces left by the 1st and 3d Battalions on the original positions were properly executed. Twice, more aggressive security measures might have been profitable. Few efforts were made to regain contact with Company A south of OBERLASCHIED early 19 December. While it was not intended that Company A remain in position longer than was necessary to cover the withdrawal, it seems logical to assume that if nothing had been seen or heard from Company A within a reasonable time that something had happened and that an effort should be made to reestablish contact. The lack of security elements sufficiently far to the rear the morning of 19 December exposed the regiment to surprise, direct fire and its resulting casualties. Lack of security on the left flank of the regiment on 19 December allowed an enemy company to launch an attack against the left company of the 3d Battalion eventually eliminating it.

6. NON-RIFLE UNITS IN DEFENSE

Antitank Company, one platoon of Cannon Company and Troop B, 18th Cavalry Squadron were on the main line of resistance of the 423d Infantry as rifle units, each responsible for the sustained defense of an assigned zone. It was, of course, this section of the front selected by the Germans to make their initial penetration. These non-rifle units lack the training and equipment to maintain a sustained defense. Although trained in necessary supporting roles, they may be used effectively as riflemen for short periods in emergencies. It is felt, therefore, that an extended front might better be defended by organizing strong points supported by mobile reserves. If supporting units must be used in other than their primary role, they might well be used as part of the reserve. In this operation, their part in a cordon defense against an aggressive attack resulted in such losses that their further use in their basic missions was considerably curtailed.

7. FAILURE TO KEEP STAFF OFFICERS INFORMED

Upon being ordered to the regimental command post on 19 December to receive the regimental attack order, the Battalion commander, 1st Battalion, failed to take a member of his staff with him. The heavy artillery fire which mortally wounded him was completely unexpected; therefore, the battalion commander's loss with the attendant confusion and lost time resulted in the 1st Battalion crossing the line of departure almost on time but with its company commanders only partially oriented with the barest information, units disorganized and confused, coordination with adjacent units hasty and incomplete and control sketchy. Had a member of the staff accompanied the battalion commander it is felt that the new battalion commander would then have received the attack order in sufficient time to formulate his plan, issue his order, verify control measures, and properly supervise the activities of his companies.

LESSONS

1. a. In defense of an extended front, extreme care must be exercised in the selection of positions and of units to defend those positions.
b. Every effort must be made to have available an effective reserve, especially when the position cannot be covered properly by defensive fires.
2. Constant command and staff supervision of communications is required at all times under all conditions.
3. Ordinary quantities of supply and routine methods of resupply must be freely and quickly modified to fit special combat situations.
4. Coordination between adjacent units must be continuous.
5. Security elements must be far enough from the main body to warn it of enemy activity in sufficient time for countermeasures to be taken.
6. Units trained in supporting roles should not be used as rifle units except in emergencies and then only for limited periods.
7. Commanders must assure themselves that in the event they become casualties their current information, plans and orders are immediately available to their successors.